

## Expert Perspectives

*The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat's **Expert Perspectives** has been developed to support reflection, dialogue and further investigation into key issues in Ontario education. The author's position is not necessarily endorsed by the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat or the Ministry of Education.*



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## Understanding Effective Character Education

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There are many sayings that remind us how we tend to revisit old ideas. “Everything old is new again.” “History repeats itself.” “And the seasons, they go round and round ...” This is certainly true of character education. In the U.S., character education has had a renaissance since 1992. But it had another heyday during the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and few today are aware of it. In Canada, its history is more easily tracked under other names, such as values education and moral education. Under various names it has ebbed and flowed for centuries in Europe, Canada and the U.S. (and elsewhere). And now it is re-emerging in Ontario, with the full and enthusiastic support of the Ministry of Education, in a new form integrated with community engagement and consultation. For that reason alone, it is worth considering a few key questions: (1) What is modern character education? (2) Does character education work? (3) What does effective character education look like?

## What Is Character Education?

The term “character education” is simply the current term for what is a millennia-old issue. It has lived under various names and still does in different parts of the world – for example, values education, moral education, civic education, social-emotional learning, citizenship education, positive youth development. No society can survive if it does not deliberately foster the development of civic character in each subsequent generation of youth. And this socialization must be done by various sectors of society: family, community, media, schools and so on. It has always been a central obligation of schools, especially in a self-governing society like Canada, to contribute substantively to the moral formation of youth. We justify this in three ways. First, the only way to make a more moral world is to make more moral people. Second, as the saying goes “a child is the only substance from which a responsible adult can be made.” Third, schools have a profound and extensive influence on youth as they spend a large percentage of their child and adolescent years in schools. Character education is the deliberate development, in schools, of youth’s tendency and capacity for responsible, pro-social and respectful democratic citizenship in

our society. Some of the more commonly listed attributes of such youth are: (1) respect for self, others and the world in which we live; (2) responsibility; (3) an orientation toward and capacity for fairness or justice; (4) a concern for the welfare of others; (5) a commitment to honesty and transparency of purpose; and (6) a dedication to democracy in both politics and daily living.

Character education then is the school-based process for fostering the development of such attributes in students. As such, it is necessarily multi-faceted and complex. I find it helpful to remind educators that character education *is* rocket science. In order to foster the development of a very complex and diverse set of psychological components of character (such as conscience, empathy, moral reasoning, values, moral identity, etc.), one requires an equally complex and multi-faceted implementation strategy.

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At its most molecular level, character education is the building of a diverse network of positive pro-social relationships (among students but also among staff and between staff and students, staff and parents, administrators and staff and so on). At the more macro level, it is comprehensive school reform and entails all aspects of the school’s functioning from its academic curricula, to its discipline policies, to its governance structures, to its mission statement, to the adult culture of the school and so on.

## **Does Character Education Work?**

This is actually a difficult question to answer with a yes or no. The reason is not that there is too little research with which to reach a conclusion. In fact, quite a substantive body of research has been amassed, especially over the past decade or two (see Table 1 on page 8 for a list of selected research reviews). The reason is that character education is a term that is applied to such a

broad range of programs and strategies. Probably a better question is, Can character education work, and, if so, under what circumstances is it most likely to be effective?

The short answer to the first part of that question is yes. Character education can work and it frequently does. The Character Education Partnership’s *What Works in Character Education* looked at 69 research studies of 33 character education programs, concluding that character education works, impacting a wide range of outcomes (including academic achievement). The U.S. Department of Education’s *What Works Clearinghouse* identified 13 programs with evidence of effectiveness. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning’s *Safe and Sound* reported that nearly half (34) of the 80 programs they reviewed had either strong or promising evidence of effectiveness. But it is important to remember that it is much more likely to work when it is well designed, relying upon research-based principles and a meaningful conceptual framework which are fully and accurately implemented.

Beyond these program reviews, there is further evidence of the effectiveness of character education. A set of four large studies of variations of the CharacterPlus framework has shown effectiveness for both changes in school culture and in academic achievement. Additionally, an investigation of 120 California elementary schools by Jacques Benninga and his colleagues revealed that character education is significantly related to academic achievement in both language arts and mathematics as measured by the state standardized academic assessment.

It is clear from this body of research that:

1. Character education can work and frequently does.
2. Effective character education impacts a wide range of student cognitive, affective, behavioural and academic outcomes.
3. Effective character education comes in many shapes and sizes.
4. We can identify aspects of character education that seem strongly related to effectiveness.

**“All effective character education programs include at least optional professional development, and many have extensive mandatory training.”**



## What Is Effective Character Education?

The *What Works in Character Education* report attempts to identify implementation practices that are most prevalent in effective character education programs. Coupling those conclusions with those from a few other studies provides a list of effective strategies.

### Professional Development

Given that character education is complex (both procedurally and conceptually), it makes sense that to attempt to implement comprehensive school culture and pedagogical reform without adequate training is not likely to be overly successful. All effective character education programs include at least optional professional development, and many have extensive mandatory training. Some pedagogical elements (e.g., co-operative learning, class meetings) require extensive training themselves. Professional development time and funding is at a premium in most schools, but somehow the time and money for investing in quality character education competency needs to be found. Leadership (at all levels of the education hierarchy) is a critical factor in making this happen, and leadership training for character education and school reform is part of the needed professional development. The *PeaceBuilders* Program offers a fine example of extensive and varied professional development for the professional staff who will implement the program, including a pre-implementation orientation, on-going school-year coaching and structured study sessions.

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### Leadership

A growing body of evidence has focused attention on the importance of school (and broader educational) leadership in character education and in school change and reform in general. No school initiative is principal-proof. And no comprehensive school reform initiative can succeed without strong, supportive, committed and competent leadership. The school leader has the greatest influence on school climate (much as a corporate CEO does for corporate climate). School leaders need to value character education, understand deeply what it entails and have the competency to be a character education instructional leader. The latter requires engaging in leadership practices that parallel and exemplify the character traits one is targeting and the educational processes one endorses. For example, school leaders need to look at and deconstruct how they run staff meetings and how they evaluate and support faculty. School leader preparation programs rarely focus on such issues. Often supplemental training (such as the Sanford N. McDonnell Leadership Academy in Character Education in St. Louis, Missouri) is required. *Characterplus* reports that leadership commitment and involvement is the strongest differentiating factor between schools that implement effectively and those that do not.

### Key Benefits

- **School climate improves.**
- **Students and staff perceive school as a caring, safe, child-centred place.**
- **Students behave more appropriately and pro-socially.**
- **Misconduct, drug use and violence decline significantly.**
- **Academic motivation and achievement scores increase, including on standardized tests.**
- **Students improve their problem-solving skills and develop greater emotional competency (and other aspects of social and emotional intelligence).**



### **Mission-driven Initiative**

There are many reasons for investing in character education – commitment to educating the whole child, an ethical school focus, contributing to making a better world, supporting democratic society. Whatever the justification is in a given school, it must be part of the core mission of the school. The more central a focus on promoting character development is, the more likely it will be to succeed. Too many mission statements are merely token gestures to check off one more obligation, and have nothing to do with directing the life of the school. School leaders need to articulate clearly the character mission, need to keep it alive by invoking it as a central criterion for policy and practice, and need to give it top priority in school functioning and resource allocation. As one principal said, “If I have to order fewer footballs to pay for character education, then that is what I will do.” Part of being mission driven is being comprehensive. The Character Education Partnership ([www.character.org](http://www.character.org)), in its seminal *Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education*, highlights the point that character education should be reflected in all aspects of school life. The elements highlighted here are components of what together should comprise a comprehensive and integrated school improvement plan, not a smorgasbord of individual options that each alone can be expected to be effective. Charles Elbot and David Fulton’s *The Intentional School Culture* (2003) published by the Denver Public Schools offers a detailed guide for how to move a school through phases of establishing a comprehensive mission-driven initiative.

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### **Peer Interaction Strategies**

There are a cluster of pedagogical strategies that are highly prevalent in effective character education programs and that share a common theme: a heavy emphasis on peer interaction. Given the constructivist and democratic principles that frequently underlie the conception of character education, this is not surprising. Constructivism suggests that learning happens most effectively and profoundly when one grapples to make meaning of the world by confronting and interacting with it, rather than by simply being told about it. Often this grappling is best done in small peer groupings. Additionally, character education is best understood as wedded to the civic virtues that undergird democracy.

The development of democratic character or civic virtue requires experiencing the power and place of one’s voice in the collaborative deliberations of peers. One of the most common examples is class meetings, where teachers facilitate the entire class engaging in discussions of curricula content, classroom management, extra-curricular activities and current events. Students in such meetings are empowered to make decisions, solve problems, debate issues and plan activities (see Caring School Community at [www.devstu.org](http://www.devstu.org) or Morning Meetings at [www.responsiveclassroom.org](http://www.responsiveclassroom.org) for resources). A special case of class meetings is moral dilemma discussions in which teachers facilitate students collectively grappling with moral problems (see [www.uni-konstanz.de/ag-moral/moral/dildisk.htm](http://www.uni-konstanz.de/ag-moral/moral/dildisk.htm) for Georg Lind’s model). Such a method has frequently been confused with values clarification, which had a brief period of popularity in Canada and the U. S. in the 1970s. Kathleen Gow, for example, mistook moral dilemma discussions with values clarification in her 1980 book, *Yes Virginia, There Is a Right and Wrong*. What she failed to recognize was that only the latter was based on a philosophy of moral relativism. Moral dilemma discussions promote a universal set of moral reasoning competencies.

Co-operative learning is yet another powerful peer interactive method, and can be turbo-charged for character education by positing both academic and character goals for the co-operative lesson (see *Blueprints for a Collaborative Classroom* at [www.devstu.org](http://www.devstu.org) or the Cooperative Learning Center at the University of Minnesota: <http://www.co-operation.org>). Other peer interactive strategies are elementary school cross-grade “buddying,” peer mentoring, peer tutoring, peer conflict mediation/resolution programs, middle and high school advisory/homeroom programs, student government and so on.



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### **Social-Emotional Skill Training**

Creating the structures for peer interaction is one thing, but educators too often forget that students do not necessarily have the social-emotional competencies to engage effectively in respectful debate, work with a younger child or manage their emotions. These competencies often require direct skill development/training. Many effective character education programs incorporate such social-emotional learning elements. Students are taught how to understand and manage their own emotions, how to identify and respond appropriately to others' emotions, how to engage in effective discourse. The field of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has done extensive work in this area (see the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning: [www.casel.org](http://www.casel.org) and the Center for Social and Emotional Education: [www.csee.net](http://www.csee.net)).

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### **Role Models**

Many effective character education programs explicitly incorporate role models (often through literature and social studies curricula). There are really two categories of role models that need to be considered. The first are those we learn about. They may be fictional characters (one poll revealed that Atticus Finch of *To Kill a Mockingbird* was considered the most moral fictional character in movie history), historical figures (e.g., Mother Theresa, Roméo Dallaire, Martin Luther King) or contemporary local heroes. The second are those we *interact with*. These are the adults in students' lives. In the school they are administrators, teachers and support staff. (In some cases there are supplemental adults who take these roles as in Big Brother/Big Sister programs or peer mentoring programs.) These people need to “walk the talk.” School staff effectively promote responsibility when they themselves act responsibly (e.g., deliver promised lessons or feedback on time, etc.). Staff promote respect when they respect students (e.g., value their potential, seriously consider their

suggestions). As Tom Lickona has said, “the most effective tool a teacher has in promoting character in students is their own character.” Or, as I have often said, the most important tool a teacher has in character education is her mirror.

### **Direct Teaching**

Most character education programs explicitly teach about character, morality, values and virtue. Often they have a list of targeted character outcomes (the most common are respect, responsibility, fairness, honesty and caring) and a curriculum about them. Many character education curricula exist for such character concepts. This is in a sense a “saliency strategy.” In other words, it makes the concepts prominent in the minds of students and the life of the school. Many schools, for example, find great benefit in programs like *Project Wisdom* which

### **Some Exemplary Programs**

#### **Elementary**

- **Child Development Project – a comprehensive school reform model relying on enlightened classroom management, student empowerment, parent involvement and values-based language arts curricula**
- **Roots of Empathy – teaches elementary and middle school children about social-emotional competencies through a curriculum connected to a volunteer mother and infant (pioneered in Toronto)**

#### **Secondary**

- **Facing History and Ourselves – explores ethical issues through a social studies curriculum focused on human genocide**
- **Teen Outreach Program – a set of in-school and out-of-school curricula to broadly impact character development (relies on mentoring and service activities, began as a pregnancy prevention program)**

offers extensive curricula and supporting materials for quotes, announcements and discussion openers about character concepts. A caution is warranted here, however. Unless the school is authentically respectful, lecturing about or making announcements about respect will not likely promote character development. Students, at least when they get into the later elementary years and beyond, are quite sensitive to hypocrisy, especially in adults with authority. Schools can only promote character development if all stakeholders (administrators, teachers, support staff, etc.) manifest those same attributes. One caution here is to avoid a very common pitfall ... teaching through extrinsic incentives. Too often teachers fall prey to inducing desirable (including virtuous) behaviour by rewarding students. As the Character Education Partnership reminds us, character is only truly developed if it is valued intrinsically. One third grade class recently chose to reject an offered reward for good cafeteria behaviour because they felt they shouldn't need a reward to do the right thing.

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#### **Integration into the Core Academic Curriculum**

Nearly every successful character education program claims to integrate character education into the academic curriculum. Indeed some do this explicitly by providing their own language arts and/or social studies curricula (e.g., the *Child Development Project* includes a multicultural literature curriculum with a focus on ethics, and *Facing History and Ourselves* is a history curriculum focusing on historical genocide and human cruelty, etc.). In fact, however, most character education programs merely claim integration, but instead engage in what we often call “wedging.” A character lesson is wedged between two academic lessons. This is not integration. Having a class meeting between academic lessons is good practice, but it is not integration into the academic curriculum. On the other hand including character goals in a co-operative learning science lesson is integration. We encourage educators to “mine” the character content that already exists in their academic curricula and fully integrate character-based lessons into those academic lessons.



#### **Tips for Practice**

- **Be data-driven.** Evaluate your character education initiative and use those data for program improvement. Be sure to evaluate both implementation and outcomes (both school culture and student development).
- **Be democratic.** Focus on flattening the governance structure of both the school and the classroom. Empower staff and students.
- **Focus on the adult culture.** The adult culture of your school is critical to the overall culture and therefore to character education. Be aware of cliques, power distribution, underminers. Leadership is critical here.
- **Celebrate collectively.** Rather than the more typical highlighting of a select few exemplary “kids of character” or the weekly or monthly “classroom of character,” celebrate how well the whole school is doing, or have each teacher celebrate the entire class when it is warranted. Avoid concrete (extrinsic) rewards; rely on praise and affirmation instead.

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### **Serve Others**

Service learning integrates service with classroom learning, ideally with the core academic curriculum. Frequently effective character education programs either focus on service and/or service learning or build in opportunities for students to serve others. Such service may be in the classroom (peer tutoring, assigned chores etc.), across the school (gardening, cross-age mentoring, traffic crossing guard etc.), or in the community (helping at a senior citizen residence, cleaning a local park etc.). *Building Decision Skills* added a community service component to its ethics training curriculum to become an effective character education program. Halifax Middle School, a National School of Character (see [www.character.org](http://www.character.org) for a list of NSOC schools and districts along with brief descriptions of their character education strategies), used its advisory structure for service within the school and in the community. It is helpful to remember the difference between service and service learning (both recommended strategies).

### **Family and/or Community Involvement**

Education in general and character education in particular both benefit from enlightened participation by parents and other community members. Such involvement can happen in many ways. At the simplest level, parents can be an audience. Schools very frequently inform parents

about their character education initiatives (e.g., in newsletters, by email, on a website or through messages sent home with students). This is the most superficial form of involvement, however, as the role of parents and community members is both passive and of lower status. Another form that involvement can take is parents as clients. Schools frequently provide training and information to parents to help them with such issues as effective discipline, how to help with homework and understanding child development. The most ambitious form of involvement (and what we recommend), however, is parents as partners. This is when schools truly collaborate with parents to design, deliver and/or evaluate their character education initiatives. *Characterplus* for example requires parent representation on the school character education leadership committee. The tenth of the Character Education Partnership’s *Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education* is “engages families and community members as partners in the character-building effort.”

### **Conclusion**

As I noted above, character education *is* rocket science. As this brief summary suggests, character education is a potentially powerful tool in the critical process of child and adolescent development, a process in which schools must (and inevitably will) play a central role. A pro-active, comprehensive, collaborative and scientific approach will only make the character education initiative likely to be more effective. As is true around the world, Ontario’s future depends upon the character of its youth and how that will manifest itself when they become adult citizens. Intelligent, comprehensive, effective character education will significantly contribute to a positive future for Ontario, Canada and the world.



**TABLE 1****SELECTED RESEARCH ON CHARACTER  
EDUCATION EFFECTIVENESS**

*What Works in Character Education: A Research-driven Guide for Educators* by M. W. Berkowitz and M. C. Bier (2005). A review of 69 studies of 33 effective character education programs written for educators. Published by the Character Education Partnership. Available on their website ([www.character.org](http://www.character.org)) or the website of the Center for Character and Citizenship ([www.characterandcitizenship.org](http://www.characterandcitizenship.org)).

*What Works Clearinghouse: Character Education*. The WWC is provided by the United States Department of Education and reviews research on a range of educational topics. One such topic is character education. Evidence is found for at least partial effectiveness of 13 character education programs. Website address: <http://www.whatworks.ed.gov> or <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>.

*The Characterplus Way Results Monograph*. Characterplus is an organization in St. Louis, Missouri (USA) that has a framework for comprehensive character education (The Ten Essentials). This framework has been tested both alone and in conjunction with other character education models (most notably, Caring School Community) in four large research studies. This monograph reviews each and their composite. Available from Characterplus: [www.characterplus.org](http://www.characterplus.org).

*Character Education and Academic Achievement*. Study of 120 California elementary schools investigating the relation of character education to state academic achievement data. Published by Jacques Benninga, Marvin W. Berkowitz, Phyllis Kuehn and Karen Smith in both the *Journal of Research in Character Education* (2003) and the *Phi Delta Kappan* (2006). Available at [www.characterandcitizenship.org](http://www.characterandcitizenship.org).

*Safe and Sound: An Educational Leader's Guide to Evidence-based Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Programs*. Program review offered by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) in 2003. Reviews 80 SEL programs (not all of which have evidence of effectiveness) and provides details on their characteristics. Available at [www.casel.org](http://www.casel.org).

"Teaching and School Effects on Moral/Prosocial Development" by D. Solomon, M. S. Watson and V. Battistich (2001). In V. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Teaching* (pp. 566–603). Washington DC: American Educational Research Association. Book chapter reviewing school-based research, providing conclusions about categories of effective practice.